

What is Sex For?

A Pastoral Theology
of Our Sexed Bodies

Ian Paul

Associate Minister, St Nic's, Nottingham

Managing Editor, Grove Books

Writer and host at psephizo.com

GROVE BOOKS LIMITED

RIDLEY HALL RD CAMBRIDGE CB3 9HU

Contents

1	Introduction: Does Sex Matter?.....	3
2	The Good Gift of Sex and Bodies	5
3	Four Qualifications	14
4	Some Pastoral Implications.....	23
	Notes	26

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the leadership of Hull Vineyard for inviting me to teach on this subject in 2017, and for the congregation for engaging with it. An earlier version of the material can be found on my blog, www.psephizo.com, in the two articles on What is a biblical theology of sexuality? I am grateful for detailed comments on an earlier version of this text from Philip Jenson, and comments on the current version from Esther Prior, bishop-elect of Aston, and James Blandford-Baker.

The cover image is copyright © Grove Books Ltd

Copyright © Ian Paul 2024

First Impression December 2024
ISSN 0144-171X
ISBN 978 1 78827 435 7

1

Introduction: Does Sex Matter?

Does sex matter? That might sound like an odd question to ask—but it is important, because in both our culture and our reading of the Bible, people give very different, often contradictory, answers.

In contemporary Western culture, it is often claimed that sex does not matter. Anyone can do any job—be an executive, lead the country, play football—without their sex making any difference. In much contemporary discourse, it is implicitly claimed that there are no significant differences between the sexes, and that men and women are interchangeable in almost every role. But because of that, sex matters very much: it is seen to be important that we ensure that both sexes are equally represented in all the prominent roles in society, so that women and men feature equally prominently in the board room and on the billboard.

And sex, in terms of sexual relations and activity, is also often seen as paradoxically important and unimportant. It appears to be assumed in

many discussions and policy decisions that everyone will be having sex—after all, surely that is natural?—and the idea that our sexual activity should be limited is puzzling, strange and even harmful.¹ On the other hand, we are offered regular reminders of the lasting damage done by sexual abuse, and there are emerging voices arguing that consent is an inadequate bar for sexual activity in the light of the power of sexual forces.²

Turning to the Bible, it is often claimed that sex is not that important, and in particular that Jesus focuses on the ‘weightier matters’ of justice, poverty and inequality in the gospels. Yet our nature as sexed creatures, made male and female in the image of God, is the beginning of the story of humanity in Genesis 1 and 2, as well as the beginning of Paul’s theological expression of the gospel in Romans 1. And in Jesus’ teaching about the life of discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), sexual ethics is the second issue he addresses after the question of murder and anger.

In fact, it is not surprising that questions of sex feature all through the biblical narrative. The historical context of Scripture is premodern culture, and in any premodern society questions of marriage, family, procreation and inheritance are key elements of that culture’s priorities and values. In the modern West,

Sex is often seen as paradoxically important and unimportant

we are in an historically anomalous position in thinking about questions of sex and sexuality detached from these basic questions.

But thinking about Scripture's wider vision of sex and sexuality is a vital context for the particular challenges that most churches are facing, and the specific question of (for example) same-sex sexual relations. Differing answers to the specific questions we face usually arise from very different understandings of what Scripture says more broadly, so we need to explore this wider vision. And it will offer us both surprises and challenges, as well as some very good news!

The Pastoral Challenge

The debates about sex in church and culture are often framed in doctrinal or ideological terms. But in this booklet I want to address the pastoral issues. This demands not mere care or therapy (important as these are) but clear pastoral teaching. When Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them, his first response was to teach (Mark 6.34), since good teaching creates the context for effective pastoral care.

But in most churches, we have been caught off guard by the rapid changes in our culture. I originally developed this material for a teaching day at Hull Vinyard in 2017, and revised it in 2019 and again in 2020, and it feels as though the landscape has changed significantly even since then. The issues here feel more urgent than ever.

Many in church leadership felt for some years that there was no need to talk explicitly about sex and sexuality, since the teaching of the church was clear and known. Then, suddenly, as culture has shifted, the need has become urgent—but in the meantime, the views of church members has changed so quickly that the conversation has become contentious and difficult. The vacuum of teaching here has created tensions which has made addressing this vacuum deeply challenging.

I am very conscious that the Questions for Reflection that I have included contain some big issues which will be pastorally challenging. They are questions that need addressing, but in each context they will need to be handled with great care and sensitivity. And it is vital that all eight of the affirmations that follow are held together; our greatest mistakes in the past have come when we have focussed on some of them at the expense of others.